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AUTHOR Comerford, Daniel J., III; Jacobson, Michael G.
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ABSTRACT

As a disciplinary procedure, suspension of students from all school levels has become a serious problem. Because of early maladaptive behavior, many students never receive services they need in order to benefit from their educational experiences. Instead, they are continually suspended, often expelled, and either drop out or are pushed out of school. While school suspension literature focuses mainly on black, poor, and inner-city students, there is a rapidly increasing number of middle class, white, suburban students who are being denied full educational benefits. Suspension also contributes to juvenile delinquency. This paper attempts to collect and analyze suspension data at four predominantly white, middle-class, suburban junior high schools and to make recommendations about research-based alternatives to suspension for each school. Alternative practices such as in-school suspension, behavior contracts, peer group counseling, work-study alternatives, and others are discussed and their advantages over regular suspension emphasized. The four sources of data used included: guided interviews, document analysis, nondirective interviews, and participant observation. Respondents in all four schools concurred that suspension is ineffective in changing disruptive behavior. Discipline recommendations and alternatives for each school are discussed at length. Several conclusions, including the need for a diversity of alternatives, are briefly summarized. Included are 21 references and 6 data tables. (MLH)

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SUSPENSION - "CAPITAL PUNISHMENT FOR MISDEMEANORS"
The Use of Suspension at Four Suburban Junior High Schools and Viable Alternatives that Could Work
An Ethnographic Study

Dr. Daniel J. Comerford III
Three Village CSD
Stony Brook, New York

Dr. Michael G. Jacobson
Western Illinois University
Macomb, Illinois

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INTRODUCTION/PERSPECTIVE

The suspension of students from all levels of school has become a problem of national proportions (Children's Defense Fund, 1985). As a disciplinary procedure, suspension is often abused and its use deprives students of the school services they urgently need.

Despite the fact that many students exhibit maladaptive behavior early in their schooling, many of them are never provided the services they need to benefit from their educational experience. Not only has the school neglected these students by failing to provide them with the special help and programs they require, school officials overtly discriminate against students who cause disciplinary problems by continually suspending them and often expelling them. As a result, many of these students drop out or are pushed out of school.

According to the Eighteenth Annual Gallup Poll (Gallup, 1986) lack of discipline continues to be the primary concern of the public. Traditional methods of dealing with disruptive behavior, that is, detention, suspension, expulsion, and in some cases, corporal punishment, have proven to be time-consuming, costly, and ineffective (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). If the purpose of these punishments has been to effect some positive change in the students' behavior or to motivate them to produce better work, then clearly they have failed. This "capital punishment for misdemeanors" (McClung, 1974) may have the long-term effect of creating a generation of disenfranchised

citizens whose lack of education will not only embarrass, but threaten all of society. With this indictment in mind, it seems obvious that new methods of treating disruptive students are essential if we are to effect the behavioral changes necessary in order to educate those students.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Although the overwhelming majority of the literature on suspension from school as well as studies on dropouts and pushouts report on black, poor, and inner city students (Children's Defense Fund, 1985), there is a rapidly increasing number of middle class, white, suburban students who are being denied the full services of the educational system. In addition to the obvious loss of schooling and its academic effect, suspension has been cited as a cause for emotional and psychological trauma and recurring behavior problems (Ban and Ciminillo, 1977; Children's Defense Fund, 1975; U.S. Congress, Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, 1977). School officials, parents, and students also blame suspension for undercutting the respect for authority, contributing to juvenile delinquency (Schreiber, 1964), denying needed help to marginal students, and reinforcing discrimination (McClung, 1975). If there is a causal relationship between suspension and even a few of these problems, then it would seem obvious that more effective and productive ways of educating and disciplining students must be developed if we are to impact upon them in a positive way (National Commission

on the Reform of Secondary Education, 1973; McClung, 1974; Rowe et al., 1974).

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to collect and analyze data about the number of suspension, suspension procedures, and attitudes toward suspension at four predominantly white, middle class, suburban junior high schools and to make recommendations about alternatives to suspension for each school. These alternatives will be formulated from a wide variety of programs which have proven successful and have been reported in the literature.

ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION

The review of the literature yields a great number of alternatives to out-of-school suspension. Philosophically, they range from corporal punishment to paid school jobs for disruptive students. Financially, they vary from no-cost written assignments or detention to fully funded separate programs for socially maladjusted students. In recent years, many school systems across the country have developed and implemented a variety of alternative educational programs and special classes for disciplinary problem students. Aside from being a new and innovative way to learn, these alternative schools are also used as a substitute to suspension from school. In addition to these alternative schools, many school districts have developed a wide assortment of methods which deal with students in school rather than excluding them from it.

Keeping students in school and not excluding them for disciplinary reasons is widely supported in the literature. In addition to full-time alternative schools for disciplinary problem students, there are many in-school programs utilizing a variety of techniques that serve as an alternative to suspension. One of the simplest techniques to implement and possibly the least radical in its approach to discipline problems is an in-school suspension program. Both Mizell (1977) and Meares (1976) agree that in-school suspension has many advantages over sending a student out of school. Among these advantages are: (1) students do not miss school work, (2) students are in school rather than roaming the community, (3) suspension may be from several, but not all classes, (4) reinstatement in class requires no formal procedure, (5) suspension is not viewed as a reward, (6) access to support services is not interrupted, (7) no permanent conduct record is necessary, (8) alienation is lessened, and (9) state aid continues.

In addition to articles on specific in-school programs for disciplinary problem students, the literature is replete with reports by professional organizations, private institutions, government agencies, as well as individuals listing the wide variety of alternatives to disciplinary exclusion (Philadelphia School District, 1976; Louisiana State Department of Education, 1975; Dade County Public Schools, 1976; Fiske, 1977; New York State Education Department, 1972). Commenting on the misuse of suspensions, the Children's

Defense Fund (1975) recommends that, "Alternatives should be supported, refined, and multiplied to meet the needs of the children and teachers in all school districts." Among the alternatives to suspension that they list are: (1) behavior contracts, (2) student ombudsman, (3) peer group counseling, (4) teacher training programs, (5) in-school centers (cooling off rooms where counseling takes place), (6) special education programs for diagnosing discipline problems, (7) work-study alternatives, (8) career study centers, and (9) district-wide alternative schools for dropouts and disruptive students. Although this list is quite extensive in suggesting options to suspension, it is, by no means, complete. The Discipline Committee of National School Boards Association (1977) reports many more alternatives to suspension. They are: (1) school within a school, (2) short-term suspension rooms (one period at a time), (3) adjustment transfer to another school, (4) referral to a vocational counselor, (5) home visits, (6) adoption by a teacher (this system gives the problem student one teacher to confide in and sets up a one-to-one counseling situation), (7) overnight suspension (suspension from all after school and night time activities at the school), (8) buddy system (pairing troublesome students with "normal" students throughout their daily schedule), and (9) withdrawal of privileges.

With all of these alternatives to suspension readily available, it is ironic that many of the best equipped and, all long thought to be, most progressive school districts in the United States should continue to use one of the most

educationally detrimental and historically traditional forms of discipline, that is, suspension from school. While after-school detention, demerit systems, and in-school suspension in the main office are also used, few attempts at counseling procedures or other techniques to diagnose the causes of the disciplinary problem are made. As a result, the use of suspension, and ultimately expulsion, remains a frequently used means of "solving" the problem of disruption to the educational process.

METHOD

Because this research is concerned with describing multiple realities and developing understanding and not with testing theory, showing relationships between variables, or describing a reality statistically, a qualitative approach to data gathering and analysis was chosen over a quantitative methodology (Bodgan and Biklen, 1982). To obtain the most complete picture regarding the use and number of suspensions and suspension procedures at each of the four randomly selected junior high schools participating in this study, a variety of data sources were utilized. There were four diverse sources of data used in this study: guided interviews, document analysis, nondirective interviews, and participant observation. By employing all four of these data collecting techniques, the inherent weaknesses and limitations of each were greatly minimized. As Rist (1979) points out, data from diverse sources tend to be complementary because of

their reciprocal strengths and weaknesses. The total number of guided interviews conducted was 104. That number includes eight administrators (two from each school), sixteen teachers (four from each school), forty suspended students (ten from each school), and forty nonsuspended students (ten from each school). All the students interviewed were ninth graders.

The method of data analysis used is a content analysis of the guided interview transcripts, the nondirective interview field notes, the participant observer field notes, and the written documents.

RESULTS

In all four of the schools participating in this study, suspension is used as a disciplinary technique. The total number of suspensions accounted for 1,673 days of lost schooling as follows: School A - 721 days, School B - 85 days, School C - 781 days, School D - 86 days. Even though the number of suspensions is low in two of the four schools, traditional forms of discipline, including suspension, are often opted for rather than using the many alternatives available to administrators. In order to reverse this trend, administrators and other policy makers need to be made aware of the great variety of alternatives to suspension. School districts must be shown that these alternatives are economically feasible within their budgetary constraints and educationally viable for their student populations.

Although substantial differences exist among the four junior high schools that participated in this study, there are

some general comments about suspension which can be applied to all the schools. First, respondents in all four role groups overwhelmingly agree that suspension is ineffective in changing disruptive behavior. Second, the frequency of suspension as a disciplinary technique is generally underestimated by those enforcing its use--teachers and administrators--and overestimated by those receiving it--suspended students--(see Appendix A, Table 6). Third, alternatives to suspension and their implementation at the respective schools are supported by all four role groups. Fourth, boys are suspended far more often than girls (see Appendix A, Tables 1, 2, and 3). Fifth, students (boys and girls) from low-income families are suspended at a much higher rate than students whose family income is above $20,000 per year (see Appendix A, Table 5).

DISCIPLINARY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION

The primary considerations in implementing any alternatives to suspension are financial and philosophical. First, given that school districts do not have unlimited funds, recommendations must be financially affordable. Second, the alternatives to suspension must be philosophically palatable to those administrating them. Changes in disciplinary procedures must evolve over time, particularly if the thrust of the discipline had been to punish disruptive students rather than change disruptive behavior.

Junior High School A

The disciplinary recommendations for School A are

procedural in nature and require a change in approach rather than a significant expenditure of money to implement. First, a list of specific rules and their consequences should be drawn up by a discipline committee of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Second, parental involvement in school affairs should be encouraged through frequent announcements by mail about school activities, individual contact by telephone about their children (positive as well as negative), committee work, increased Parent-Teacher Organization activity, and parenting workshops, seminars, and group counseling sessions. Third, the rules and procedures should be reviewed annually by the discipline committee rather than being subject to constant change.

A clear, well-defined set of rules and procedures which is jointly developed by and distributed to students, parents, and teachers should eliminate much of the confusion and frustration associated with the current policy. The punishments for infractions of these rules would all take place in a supervised environment--the school. They would include detention after school, in-school suspension, withdrawal of privileges, and overnight suspension.

Junior High School B

Since School B already has a well-defined set of disciplinary rules and procedures and suspension is only used to increase parental involvement in the most serious disruptive cases, recommendations about disciplinary procedures and the development of alternatives to suspension are easy to

generate. Of the 106 suspensions issued, eighty-nine were assigned to students suspended more than once and seventy-eight of these were issued to eighteen boys (see Appendix A, Table 1 and 2). It appears that while the vast majority of students present no serious discipline problems, there is a small group of chronically disruptive boys whose behavior continues to interrupt the school day. Since the goal of the school is to effect some positive change in their behavior and not to punish them, the creation of a special class for these students would be helpful in several ways. First, they would be separated from the rest of the student body in a restricted environment. The low teacher-student ratio would facilitate the variety of activities which could be implemented and expedite supervision. Second, the use of support services, such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers, and referral to outside agencies in serious cases, could be concentrated in one place. Third, special services could be implemented in the class. These would include: individual and peer group counseling, academic tutoring, values clarification exercises, and behavior modification. Fourth, a more exciting curriculum could be devised which would include: individual and group projects, frequent guest speakers, movies on appropriate topics, educational and recreational field trips, overnight camping trips, and a multi-media approach to teaching basic skills. Fifth, a reward system for positive behavior could be instituted. The goals of the special class would be to remediate basic skills, increase positive self-image, and change disruptive behavior.

Junior High School C

The lack of clearly defined disciplinary rules and procedures, the disproportionate number of suspensions, and the absence of parental involvement all contribute to feelings of confusion, frustration, and anger by students and teachers alike. Lack of consistent disciplinary procedures, archaic forms of punishment, and out-of-school suspensions for minor disciplinary infractions must all be changed before viable alternatives to suspension can be implemented.

The recommendations for School C encompass more than simply the development of a clear, well-defined set of rules and procedures and the consistent application of those rules. Because suspension is seen as a "vacation" or "reward" for disruptive behavior and because it is not likely to modify that behavior, effective deterrents to continued disorderly conduct must be developed in conjunction with therapeutic alternatives to suspension. In order to improve student and teacher morale and increase parental participation, strategies must be devised to revitalize "school spirit" and positively motivate students, faculty, and parents to become involved in a variety of school activities.

To achieve these goals, committees of concerned students, both suspended, and nonsuspended, teachers, parents, and administrators must work together. Although specific changes will reflect the ideas, values, and concerns of those involved, general guidelines can be suggested here. First, clear well-defined rules and procedures with specific penalties for

infractions must be drawn up. Second, for these penalties to be a meaningful punishment, a positive variety of rewards and privileges for good behavior must be created. The development and implementation of a rewards system would also increase school spirit by making the school a more enjoyable place to be. These rewards might include: recreational and educational field trips, assemblies, school dances, pep rallies, field days, camping trips, student-faculty athletic contests, student-faculty variety shows, movies, and a student lounge. Third, the Parent-Teacher Organization must be revitalized through a program of increased involvement in a variety of school activities. The active involvement of teachers and parents working together for the benefit of students, a variety of positive school programs for the enjoyment of students, and well-defined disciplinary rules and procedures for the management of students, will constructively change School C.

Junior High School D

Despite the fact that the number of suspended students at School D is very low (see Appendix A, Table 2) and the rules and procedures are clear and precise, there are special problems which make disciplinary alternatives difficult to formulate. Suspended students, the majority of whom are from low income families (see Appendix A, Table 5), are not part of the mainstream in the school. Therefore, alternatives to suspension which would isolate them from the rest of the student body and further stigmatize them, would not be viable at School D. Further, whereas the majority of students enjoy the active involvement and cooperation of their parents in school affairs,

these suspended students are neglected by their parents in school-related matters.

In order to involve these parents in a cooperative effort with the school in disciplining their children and to introduce these students into the mainstream of school life, several strategies must be utilized. First, parents of suspended students must be invited to participate in the positive aspects of the school community. One of these is the Parent-Teacher Organization which is very active in school affairs. Impersonal letters and announcements from the school have not been successful in persuading these parents to join the group in the past. A concerted, sustained effort of personal contacts and telephone conversations must be initiated by teachers and parents friendly with these disenfranchised parents. Second, parenting workshops, seminars on adolescent problems, and group counseling activities must be instituted. Again, personal contact and encouragement are essential if these parents are to become involved in these activities. Third, programs of family counseling, possibly sponsored by outside agencies, must be established by the school. Fourth, positive programs to involve suspended students in a variety of student activities must be developed. Adoption by a teacher, buddy systems, peer group counseling, and a variety of social exchanges (athletic teams, dances, field trips, club activities, plays, and camping trips) could all be useful in bringing these students into the mainstream. Fifth, individual counseling and referral, behavior contracts, and behavior

modification techniques could be effective in changing disruptive behavior patterns and satisfying the need for attention.

For those students who continue to exhibit disruptive behavior despite the application of these positive alternatives, punishment is still a strategy for modifying such behavior. After-school detention, overnight suspension, and short-term suspension rooms might be effective in bringing about the desired change. Hopefully, increased parental concern and cooperation as well as the student's own involvement in the mainstream activities of the school will be a powerful deterrent to disruptive behavior and a cogent inducement to positive action.

CONCLUSION

Although the generalizability of the findings in this study is limited, certain conclusions about suspension and alternatives to suspension are so striking and suggest that they would be valid with similar populations. First, suspension is greatly overused as a disciplinary strategy. Second, suspension is ineffective both in punishing students and in modifying or changing disruptive behavior. Third, a great diversity of alternatives to suspension are available for implementation. Fourth, in order for any disciplinary system to work, several elements must be present: a clear, well-defined set of rules and procedures consistently and equitably applied, a variety of punitive and therapeutic alternatives to suspension to select from, the active concern and involvement of parents, and the dedication of fair, involved, caring

teachers and administrators. And finally, only a diversity of alternatives can achieve optimum results. The key to successfully motivating a student to positively change his/her behavior is to select the most efficacious disciplinary alternative from the variety of options available.

Suspension will be eliminated only by vigorously defending every student's right to a full education and by developing and implementing viable alternatives to suspension in every school. Failure to reject this systematic denial of education may result in a long-term social cost that we are unwilling or unable to pay.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF SUSPENSIONS BY SEX

	Number of Suspensions								
	Total			Once			More than Once		
School	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl
A	212	168	44	51	32	19	161	136	25
B	106	90	16	17	12	5	89	78	11
C	223	166	57	64	41	23	159	125	34
D	72	55	17	11	8	3	61	47	14
TOTAL	613	479	134	143	93	50	470	386	84

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED BY SEX

	Number of Students Suspended								
	Total			Once			More than Once		
School	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl
A	85	59	26	51	32	19	34	27	7
B	39	30	9	17	12	5	22	18	4
C	107	75	32	64	41	23	43	34	9
D	30	23	7	11	8	3	19	15	4
TOTAL	261	187	74	143	93	50	118	94	24

TABLE 3

RATE OF SUSPENSION BY SEX (BOYS : GIRLS)

	Rate of Suspensions					
	Total		Once		More than Once	
School	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
A	3.8	1	1.7	1	5.4	1
B	5.6	1	2.4	1	7.8	1
C	2.9	1	1.8	1	3.7	1
D	3.2	1	2.7	1	3.4	1
TOTAL	3.6	1	1.9	1	4.6	1

TABLE 4

SUSPENSION AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

	Suspended Students			Nonsuspended Students		
School	Total	One Parent	Two Parents	Total	One Parent	Two Parents
A	85	23	62	320	87	233
B	39	9	30	343	91	252
C	107	28	79	366	95	271
D	30	7	23	351	87	264
TOTAL	261	67	194	1,380	360	1,020

TABLE 5

SUSPENSION AND FAMILY INCOME

	Suspended Students			Nonsuspended Students		
School	Total	Below $20,000	Above $20,000	Total	Below $20,000	Above $20,000
A	85	25	60	320	21	299
B	39	29	20	343	46	297
C	107	63	44	366	68	298
D	30	21	9	351	6	345
TOTAL	261	128	133	1,380	331	1,049

TABLE 6

PERCENTAGE OF SUSPENSION AND SUSPENSION PERCEPTIONS

	Percent Suspended	Perception of Percent Suspended by Role Group			
School		S	NS	T	A
A	20.9	35	20	6	4
B	10.2	40	10	3	4
C	22.6	30	25	9	4
D	7.8	25	10	5	3

S - Suspended Students
NS - Nonsuspended Students
T - Teachers
A - Administrators

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